



The strength of the authoritarian Colombian elite and the fragmentation of the reformist currents¹

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General premise on peace negotiations

Political negotiations always take place in *volatile* contexts where many transactions run simultaneously. Government officials have to negotiate with their declared enemies, while at other levels, other non-governmental rival political elites have to find an acceptable ground with those negotiating, and the most radical currents on the far right and left have to be isolated so as to attenuate the damage that can be caused by “spoilers”. Because of the many players and negotiations going on simultaneously, generally there is a great amount of *uncertainty* surrounding peace making and peace building processes.

1. The Specificity of the Colombian Case: Embattled Political Traditional Elites

In Colombia, with all its ambiguities, the democratic regime allows for a diversity of traditional political elites to compete for power. Between these competing elites, fractures run deep, even after they signed the National Front pact in 1957. According to the canonic academic reading of the period, the National Front put an end to the violent clashes among them.

However, the opposition met by the Colombian Accord—well designed and reform oriented—shows how the rivalry among traditional political elites is not over but *dormant*, becoming alive at critical historical junctures. The 2016 plebiscite results made visible once again the division, a fracture that leaves its imprint even nowadays in the handling of the present crisis caused by a 24 days long general strike.

In both cases—the Accord and the general strike—, there are two deeply opposed views on the foundations of legitimacy, democracy, and conflict-transaction, making the political pact noticeably fragile and contested by “outsiders” (i.e. the guerrillas) as well as supposed insiders.

¹ Colloque international « “Dialoguer entre ennemis”. Nécessités et obstacles à la résolution des conflits armés dans le monde », 25-26 mai 2021. « Ateliers de la paix » à l’Assemblée nationale, en partenariat avec SoV - Sortir de la violence (projet ANR-16-CE39-0010), la revue *Violence : an International Journal* et le réseau international La Bande Passante.

On one side, stands an elite inclined to an authoritarian view of social order, one that gives priority to legality and security over other considerations including human rights guarantees; and on the other, a liberal elite willing to negotiate but unable to secure enough socio-political backing to sustain the reforms behind the accord.



Authoritarian

Legitimacy=legality

Due consent

Static rules and order

Organic order with established hierarchies

Security and order over

Human Rights

Democratic

Legitimacy is based on citizens' granted consent to authorities

That consent is dynamic

It is expressed through communication practices, either by voting, Congress debates or through public contestation

The crucial question from a historical perspective is not why these pro statu quo elites are still so embattled but:

Why is the authoritarian elite so strong?

Or why is the pro peace negotiation elite unable to build a majoritarian bloc?

2. The Long-term frame: Concordat + a lack of professional autonomy from security forces + a deep electoral skepticism

- The authoritarian cultural matrix stood on a long-term allegiance between the Catholic church and the State. The 1886 constitution was intertwined with the Concordat, a pact between the Colombian State and the Vatican. The Catholic church and its most conservative currents regulated education and incorporated a conservative world view over



many social sectors.

- The Military began a professionalization process in 1907 with the foundation of its own school, but it still faces nowadays a fragile autonomy vis a vis the political parties
- The Police was under local control becoming a political police during La Violencia
- Low electoral turn over- abstentionism campaigns in the seventies after the 1970 contested and for some fraudulent election (Low faith in the electoral game)

3. The contextual factors: the impossible game

- The FARC and some currents of the left could not “read” the deep divisions among the elites seen as a block of dominant classes. From this stand point, alliances were seen as unthinkable with liberals, center or even the left.
- The liberals were caught up in a no-win game: they understood the risk of a backlash, but they feared a caudillismo of the left as Venezuela, our next-door neighbor, has been constructed as a no man’s land.
- The center (Partido Verde), as the liberals, wanted to play on their own as they had worked hard to build their own electoral support.
- The left, divided, downplayed the strength of the authoritarian matrix.

In a situation that demands **alliances** to defeat a strong right, competing elites from different parties seem incapable of bridging the differences and working together towards a common goal: keeping safe the peace accord through coalitions and blocking a win from the authoritarian right.